

**LESSON:** Ransom Letter: “Short and Sweet” Exercise

**TIME:** One 50-minute period

**CLASS LEVEL:** 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade

**TEKS LANGUAGE ARTS GOAL:** In this lesson, students engage in reading a short story, and then, compose a written text with a clear controlling idea, coherent organization, and sufficient detail.

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION:** Why does O. Henry incorporate irony in many of his works? What impact would the lack of irony have had on this particular story?

**STUDENTS (In Class Studies):**

- read [“The Ransom of Red Chief: The Tale of a Reformed Kidnaper”](#) by O. Henry
- identify the overall plot, characters and irony of O. Henry’s story
- discuss, in particular, the ransom note/letters showcased in the story
- create a ransom letter using poetic and humorous writing techniques

**TEKS:** 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts: Reading/Fluency, Reading/Vocabulary Development, and Writing/Expository Texts

Reading: (1) (2) (3) (6A) (6B) (6C) Writing: (14A) (14B) (14C) (14D) (14E) (17A)

**VOCABULARY:**

**Irony:** A subtly humorous perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very different significance. There are different forms of irony, such as structural, tragic, and verbal.

**Plot:** The pattern of events and situations in a narrative or dramatic work, as selected and arranged both to emphasize relationships—usually of cause and effect—between incidents and to elicit a particular kind of interest in the reader or audience, such as surprise or suspense.

**Step 1**

Have the students read a handout of “The Ransom of Red Chief” by O. Henry in advance. Have them make special note of the difficult/unknown words and circle them in the story, look up in dictionary, and be prepared to discuss their meanings. Examples: “somnolent,” “depredation,” and “philoprogenitiveness.”

**Step 2**

In class, and if time, re-read the short story, paying special attention to the unusual words/mispronunciation, punctuation, and primary messages within O. Henry’s work. Discuss the use of irony throughout the story—how it was used to create the humor in the story. Prompt with “Can you find examples of irony in this story?” “What made that ironic approach humorous for you?” “Did the kidnapers clearly state their demands?”

**Step 3**

Tell the students they will now write their own ransom letter, emphasizing this is a pretend kidnapping of an object from someone. Stress that humor is the point of this writing exercise—you want to make the readers laugh!

**Step 4**

Using the ransom letter assignment handout, provide the students with the requirements for producing a quality ransom letter, along with the sample poem.

**Step 5**

You can begin this exercise in class and provide final due date for a draft of the writing assignment. Plan class time for students to share (publish) their final draft of the ransom letter/poem:

**Extensions:**

For more information and photos of the O. Henry Museum artifacts go to <http://brushsquaremuseums.pastperfectonline.com/>.

**For Museum Tours:** Offered at three sites within Brush Square—the Susanna Dickinson Museum, the O. Henry Museum, and the Austin Fire Museum. Wednesday through Friday, noon – 5 p.m. The museums are small historic spaces and can only accommodate a maximum of 15 students at a time. Large groups will be broken into sub-groups that will rotate through each of the museums.

All tours require two weeks advance notification. To make a tour reservation, or for more information, please contact [Bao Nguyen](#).